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Grace rejects EPA asbestos cleanup plan

EPA says cleanup to go on as scheduled

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and W.R. Grace and Co. announced April 18 that Grace has rejected an EPA plan to clean asbestos contamination from two former mine sites in Libby. Grace says the proposal would jeopardize the company's rights.

"W.R. Grace Company informed the U.S. EPA Region 8 on April 18 that they are not interested in signing a consensual clean-up agreement for clean up work at two former vermiculite processing areas in Libby," wrote Paul Peronard, EPA's on-scene coordinator, in a press release. "EPA must now decide on the best way to do the cleanup and will inform the public as soon as possible," Peronard said.

Grace said it would, however, accept an administrative order under which the EPA would dictate a cleanup plan and Grace would be responsible for its cost. Under such an order, Grace would retain the right to sue if it feels the costs are unfair. An agreement with EPA on a negotiated cleanup plan would limit the company's appeal rights.

Grace spokesman Bill Corcoran said the EPA plan was too broad because it asked the company to give up its rights. He said the company is committed to the cleanup.

Peronard said the EPA must consult

with the U.S. Justice Department before deciding whether to accept Grace's offer or do the cleanup itself. He said work will begin in May, regardless of that decision.

Grace operated Libby's vermiculite mine from 1963 to 1990. In November, 1999, newspapers around the country began publishing unconfirmed and unverifiable reports that "192" former Libby miners and family members had died from asbestos-related diseases, while another "375" residents had been diagnosed.

But Montana's chief medical officer, Dr. Michael Spence, said that "fewer than 100" people in the entire state have died of asbestos-related diseases.

Also, a list of Grace workers at the Libby mine who died was provided to The Montanian by Gayla Benefield of Libby Asbestos Victims Relief Organization. It shows that 50 workers died of asbestosis or mesothelioma, an asbestos-related cancer. Another 35 workers died of lung cancer, but those cases have not been definitely linked to asbestos.

The EPA has determined that two former vermiculite processing sites, which currently house a sawmill and a plant nursery, contain dangerous levels of asbestos. The nursery, Raintree Nursery, has since gone out of business.